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# The Workshop

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## THE PULPIT IN THE CHURCH OF STA. CROCE IN FLORENCE.

No period of the history of the fine Arts and their development is so interesting; none, in comparatively so short a time, so productive and manifold in its creations, as the beginning of our modern style of art, the early Italian Renaissance. The Antique, treated in the freest manner, and imbued with a romantic charm till then unknown, a most delightful naïveté and congeniality, united with perfection of beauty and form, pervading the whole, produced a style, whose fascinations no true disciple of Art was able to resist; and whose influence, of the highest importance in the advance of civilization since those times, will be of lasting duration.

The magnificent decorative works of Florentine Art, its grand marble sculptures, are what nowadays stand before our eyes as the inheritance of that golden age; and as the result of the high aspirations of the champions of their noble Art, to give a true and tangible expression to the style of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

In the days of Brunelleschi, Andrea Sansovino, Benedetto da Majano, no strict and clearly defined separation of Sculpture from Architecture was known; all-powerful in their united resources, they produce works of Art of the truest harmony and unblemished beauty, and which can only be called into life, by the simultaneous and equal proficiency of the most skilful and prominent masters of their respective arts. We have preserved to us an abundance of the most beautiful specimens, works of unsurpassed worth, tending to promote an earnest study, of the greatest importance to modern Architecture, from which the most brilliant results may be expected.

One of the most striking examples of the happiest time of the Renaissance, preserved in a wonderfully perfect state, is the pulpit of Sta. Croce in Florence,\* a work of Benedetto da Majano, a Florentine sculptor and architect, (1444—1498) one of the most charming artistic characters of the age in which he lived. The Church of Sta. Croce is justly considered one of the most striking creations of the Florentine Gothic. Begun in the year 1294, we behold a master-piece of Architecture. Octa-

gonal pillars, from which spring lofty pointed arches supporting the open timber work of the roof, divide the imposing interior into three aisles. Leaning against one of the pillars of the south aisle, is the pulpit carved in white marble of Brato, the ground plan of which forms five sides of a regular octagon, at the corners of which six fluted columns are supported by an equal number of consoles. Relievi fill the area of the panels between these columns; the contraction of the main body of the pulpit being effected by means of the consoles, they gradually draw together towards their under part, to find their lowest point of support in a terminating octagonal bracket.

This arrangement of the consoles is not without precedent. The pulpit of Sta. Maria Novella, one of the master-pieces of Maestro Lazzaro, and of somewhat earlier date, shows a similar arrangement which has therefore, not without reason perhaps, been considered the first step to the much grander work of Majano. A similar instance is to be seen in the carved wooden pulpit of Troyes, (1525) whence it may be inferred that these three works of Art, are, as it were, structural embodiments of one and the same idea.

What strikes our eyes most of all in the pulpit of Sta. Croce is the exuberant richness and elegance which the artist displays in the decoration of the panels and consoles. Neither here nor in the capitals of the six columns does the florid imagination of the Master allow the repetition of one single ornament, his inexhaustible genius embellishing them with rich and ever-varying forms of foliage, wreaths of flowers and fruits, and other decorative features. The panels, consoles and frieze under the crowning cornice, as also the escutcheon on the lower extremity of the pulpit, exhibit elegant ornamentation on gold ground which, although no longer in all its pristine splendour, contributes considerably to the harmony of the whole. This profuse introduction of gold is common to many other contemporary monumental structures, carvings in marble and wood, and is a very effective enrichment; this is illustrated for instance by the panelling, pilasters, egg-mouldings and other orna-

\* See p. 86, 87.

ments, in the sacristy of Sta. Croce and in the sepulchral monument of Marzuppini, by Desiderio da Settignano, where traces of former decorative painting may still be observed.

The statuary enrichment of the pulpit consists principally in the above named relievi, being representations from the history of the order of the Franciscans to which the Church of Sta. Croce belongs.

The subjects are

1. Pope Honorius confirming the rules of the order of St. Francesco of Assisi.
2. The Saint passing unharmed through the fire before the Sultan.
3. The sacred wounds appearing to him.
4. The death of the Saint, and
5. Martyrdom of five Franciscan monks in Mauritania.\*

The relievi, exhibiting almost throughout the happiest compositions, full of beautifully conceived ideas, are real gems of this period of Art; treated in the noblest style, they are of a remarkable delicacy and artistic finish. Rich landscape or architectural backgrounds, although sometimes on the very verge of the picturesque, still strictly within the conventional laws of the relievo, complete these panel decorations. The figures stand out in great boldness, the treatment of details, as well as the arrangement of the whole, reminding us strongly of the best works of Ghiberti. Between the consoles are five niches of red marble; each holding a statuette which, in spite of the small scale, rank, in conception and execution, with the finest creations of that time, the choicest relics of a glorious and flourishing Art. The heavenly virtues, Faith, Hope, Charity,\*\* Fortitude, and Justice, furnish the subjects of these charming representations.

Altogether this work of Art conveys the impression of the most perfect harmony and repose extending to the smallest details; it fascinates the eye by the exquisite finish of art-workmanship and composition, by the richness of imagination which it displays, and forms a highly successful artistic creation hardly to be surpassed.

The ascent to the pulpit is by a flight of steps, hidden in the pillar, and therefore quite subordinate, and shut by a door highly interesting on account of its exquisite marqueterie, or *intarsia*. This *intarsia*, or decoration of wood panelling with inlays of different colored wood, for the most part representing perspective architectural designs, attained its highest perfection at the time of Benedetto at Florence where it was much

practised. The pulpit door of Sta. Croce illustrates a typical specimen of this artistic branch. Semi-circular in its upper part, it is framed by delicate jamb mouldings of white marble, and divided by several stripes into two compartments, the upper one showing the monogram V. H. S. (*in hoc signo vinces*) surrounded by rays, the lower one an escutcheon similar to that on the pulpit, and encircled by beautifully conventionalized rose-ornaments. The whole door is of exquisite elegance and precision of workmanship.

The pulpit was erected under the auspices of the Florentine citizen Pietro Mellini, whose bust, executed by Majano himself, we find in the Uffizi Gallery. Vasari speaks of the great fears which were entertained at the time, on account of the piercing necessary for the introduction of the staircase. By this weakening of the pillar, danger was strongly apprehended for the vaulting which it supports; Mellini however gave security for any eventual damage to the building which might ensue, and Majano strengthened the pillar by cramp-irons in such a way that its solidity was not impaired.

Benedetto di Nardi da Majano, the second son of a stone mason of Majano near Florence, was born 1444. While still a youth he assisted his elder brother Giuliano in his artistic sphere; marqueterie and marble sculpture being the branches he chiefly practised. Vasari gives the highest praise to the perfection our master achieved in these works of Art, and especially mentions a marqueterie chest of remarkable beauty, executed for king Mathias Corvinus by Majano, who brought it himself to Hungary and placed it there. On his return to Florence, he occupied himself with marble sculpture, and to his hand it is that we owe the Porta dei Gigli of the Palazzo Vecchio, and the sepulchral monument of Filippo Strozzi, in the Church of Sta. Maria Novella, showing the most exquisite enrichment in the statuary adornment. Vasari, in enumerating many other of his works, omits one, the tomb of S. Bartolo in San Agostino at S. Gemignano, which on this account we mention here.

Although Majano was less productive in architecture, he attained high perfection in this art in which he may vie with the best of his contemporaries. For to him we are indebted for the prototype of Florentine Palace architecture, the Palazzo Strozzi; a work marking an era in Art and being a typical illustration of the style of his century, which bears testimony to the superior artistic genius and the extraordinary talent of a man whose influence on early Italian Renaissance was most powerful and vast in extent and importance; an influence such as only highly intellectual and master minds are able to exercise over the tendencies of their time.

\* The relievi 1, 2 and 4, are represented in our drawing, p. 87.

\*\* Represented in our drawing.